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History as Now: Allegorical (Re)visions of the Slave Experience in Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993)

This paper turns an analytical eye to Caryl Phillips's novel *Crossing the River* as an exemplary piece of postcolonial historical fiction, which aims to reconstruct the historical experience of those once deprived of a documented past. It reads the novel through an allegorical realist paradigm and argues that such an approach may open the way towards new readings of the contemporary neo-slave narratives within the postcolonial canon.

Crossing the River (1993) is a striking example of contemporary historical writing, where both the content and form work in harmony to narrate the history of the African slaves who, for more than two centuries, were denied the right to exist in historical records. However, saving from oblivion the memory of the dispossessed, and conveying their historical experience through fiction, has always necessitated finding the way to reconcile undocumented histories with the practical demands of novelistic narration. The Caribbean writers who first confronted the legacy of the Middle Passage, such as Edouard Glissant, Derek Walcott or Wilson Harris, resorted to myth and allegory, but avoided engaging with realist narrative paradigms; the younger writers, represented inter alia by Caryl Phillips or Fred D'Aguiar, have turned towards the historical novel, successfully balancing allegorical and realist traditions. As blending the documented and allegorical phenomena is not a generic feature of the contemporary neo-slave narratives, but also of other postcolonial historical novels, the present paper argues that *Crossing the River* may be viewed as part of a large body of postcolonial historical fiction which, unlike postmodern metafiction, strives to render a plausible and verifiable image of the past.[1]

Due to their ironic approach to colonial historiography and fragmentary narrative structure, neo-slave narratives have been predominantly read through the lens of postmodern or trauma studies. However, the application of postmodern historicity to postcolonial history is not always successful, as it suggests that the postmodern end of history was experienced similarly inside and outside the colonial metropolis (Young 51, Cooper 401, Chakrabarty 9). The term usually sought in this context, namely historiographic metafiction, is defined by Linda Hutcheon as "intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay[ing] claim to historical events (5);[2] this paradoxical nature of historical presentation undermines the epistemological seriousness of the historical novel, implying that it deconstructs history, rather than reconstructing it. Furthermore, presenting neo-slave narratives as trauma narratives implies that they limit themselves to replaying the transgenerational wound of slavery, which inevitably underestimates their empowering dimension. As the author of *The Long Song* (2010), Andrea Levy, once

1. I am aware that the neo-slave narratives are customarily defined as "novels that […] adopt the conventions […] of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy 3), and that they are viewed as part of Black Atlantic fiction, which revolves around the experiences of the African diaspora (Gilroy 15). These definitions, though, hardly exhaust their complexity; therefore I treat them as part of a broader category – that of postcolonial historical fiction.

2. Amy Elias coined a less radical term – "metahistorical romance" (160) – but though she notes differences between what she calls ethical (postcolonial) and postmodern historical fiction, she claims that both types merely mirror postmodern and post-structuralist debates on history.

said, her aim was to show "a totally unique society that developed around a giant, brutal island factory and survived" (410). Survival against the odds is also a significant motif in *Crossing the River*. Hence, using the words of Judith Misrahi-Barak, the contemporary neo-slave narrative no longer "talks back to the past but talks to our present day" (41) and it "tend[s] to go against the aporia of trauma theory" (50). Therefore nowadays we seek new ways of interpreting these complex texts that would be flexible enough to embrace their fragmentary and polyphonous structure, without compromising on postcolonial historicity and their overall positive message. Even though postcolonial and Afro-American studies have had a tempestuous relationship (Misrahi-Barak 49), it seems possible to bridge the gap and thus shed new light on neo-slave writing.

The notion of allegory can be useful in analyzing the way in which a writer attempts to reconcile historical veracity with broader patterns of meaning that extend the pertinence of his vision. Allegory refers to a story or image that operates on two levels, literal and metaphorical, enriching the narrative with a moral or political meaning that reaches beyond the narrated events. Allegory may be used as a means of constructing a vision of history where time is not viewed linearly and where the narrated events allude to, but do not impose, an epistemologically significant interpretation of the past. The latter definition may be traced back to Walter Benjamin, who argued that allegory best conveys our intuitive understanding that the world is transient and the truth about the past inaccessible (Cowan 112). To illustrate his idea, Benjamin used a famous example of ruins which do represent history, though they do not adhere to a typical cause and effect paradigm; "[t]hat which lies here in ruins," he said, "[is] […] the remnant" – a "highly significant fragment" of the whole (*Origin* 178). Moreover, by stating that "[a]llegories [are] in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things," Benjamin opened his theory to various forms of artistic expression (*Origin* 178) and his words bring to mind C.L.R. James's claim that, in the world without castles or cathedrals, writers play the role of historians and the novel that of a historical monument (49). They also echo Stephen Slemon's observation that, due to its prevalent focus on the past, allegory is intricately connected to postcolonial fiction. "The passage of time is at the heart of allegory," Slemon says, and thus it is "inherently involved with questions of history and tradition" (158). Postcolonial literature, therefore, has adopted allegory for representing history and substituted the Enlightenment's vision of time as continuum (Gilroy 46) for "a conflation of past and present" (Ashcroft 104).[3] The postcolonial historical novel, however, blends such temporality with a reliable image of the historical experience and thus it operates within the realms of what Hamish Dalley has called *allegorical realism* (14-8) – a narrative paradigm in which allegory coexists with realism, yet where realism does not imply an imitation of the colonial narrative patterns, but a negotiation of a verifiable historical image in reference to historical sources and literary conventions; this, in turn, makes such novels inherently dialogic, fragmentary and multi-voiced, but it does not deny their serious investment in reconstructing history.

It is therefore significant that *Crossing the River* communicates its historical vision through a series of non-synchronous images that link the novel with various elements

3. Bill Ashcroft seeks the roots of this "conflation" in the lack of documented history (104) and Ian Baucom in colonial capitalism (58), which separated the notion of material value from the material object, thus forming a specific understanding of history which is as fundamental to postcolonial historicity as the French Revolution is to the Western concept of history as progress (cf. Lukács 23).

of colonial historiography and literature. Essentially, the novel is a frame narrative, where four individual stories placed in different timelines come together to build the image of the transatlantic world born of the slave trade. The opening and closing frame is provided by the voice of an unnamed African father who has sold his children into slavery. The father believes that he has irretrievably lost them, for "[t]here are no paths in water" (1-2), and he states that disposing of his children was "[a] desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. […] For two hundred and fifty years I have listened to the many-tongued chorus and occasionally, among the sundry restless voices, I have discovered those of my own children" (1). Waiting for two hundred and fifty years, a time span that coincides with African enslavement, the father may be read as an allegorical figure of the lost, but also negligent, father(land) – Africa. In other words, he embodies a sorrowful truth, namely that though the Europeans created the trading machine, the Africans had their part in it (Bailey 57-95). In fact, the father's words unveil the whole network of complex economic relations that define the world he lives in; he was forced to rely on money, as he *sold* the children rather than *giving* them *away* or *bartering* them, and the modern monetary economy entered Africa along with colonial capitalism. The very opportunity of leaving his children to slave traders would not have arisen, had it not been for the presence of the slave trade and slave traders, but he took advantage of it. Now the father seems sentenced to a life of longing between past and present, forever attentive to his children's voices that still reverberate through time and space. The cacophony of the sounds he hears, which are soon embodied by Nash, Martha and Travis, provides the reader with a glimpse into their personal histories as well as confronting him with various aspects of colonial history. Somewhat unexpectedly, it will also bring a long-awaited relief from the wounds of history.

A poignant image of history and historical experience extends beyond the opening frame into the first section of the novel entitled "The Pagan Coast"; there the reader accompanies a former slave and a missionary, Nash Williams, who has left the United States in order to return to his native Africa. On behalf of the American Colonization Society, and encouraged by his former master, Edward, Nash starts his journey in 1834 and, based on the dating of his letters, dies in Africa around 1842. Much as with other postcolonial novels premised on the framework of a journey, "The Pagan Coast" alludes to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with Nash playing the role of Kurz, and the role of Marlow being assigned to Edward. As we learn, "Nash was a teacher of remarkable gifts," who "could lay claim to being responsible for at least fifty of the successes that were reported back to America" and "[t]he reputation of his mission school was legendary" (7). Having lost touch with Nash, who seems to have been swallowed up by the African jungle, Edward decides to try and track him down in the wilderness since, as he says, "to abandon men as remarkable as Nash could only reflect adversely on the future of [the American Colonization] Society" (12). Moreover, the narrative structure of "The Pagan Coast," itself being a frame story, may also be seen as analogous to Conrad's novella. The reader is confronted with multiple points of view on the same narrative reality and while most of the factual information is supplied by Nash's letters to Edward, their content is enriched by the narrator's comments and by Edward himself. Hence, the deeper one delves into the story, the more one begins to question the colonial myth of a perfect missionary and a perfect master that initially surrounded Nash and Edward's journey. Their troubled relationship, revealed through Nash's letters

and Edward's thoughts, becomes an allegory of the misunderstandings underlying the institution of slavery.

At the beginning of his stay in Africa, Nash treats the letters as a method of communication with Edward and he describes within them the progress of his mission, as well as asking Edward for money and other commodities. With time, however, it becomes clear that the letters are also an allegorical commentary on the (im)possibility of establishing a genuine relationship between former slaves and their masters. Frequent references to home, family and religion serve to emphasize personal experience at the expense of a specific awareness of the context involved, thus expanding the historical frame of reference. The tone Nash employs in his writing brings to mind his sound colonial education, and it is invariably polite, at points even pleading, but never openly demanding; he says for example the following: "presently I stand in need of help from you by the first chance, for I have not received one cent from your man" (22). Later, the letters take a more contemplative form, with Nash sharing his thoughts with the Father, as he consistently titles Edward, who writes back only once. "Why, dear Father, you chose to ignore my previous letters, you do not indicate" (29), Nash complains. In other passages, the narrator suggests that the correspondence, or at least its major part, was intercepted by Edward's wife, who disapproved of his contact with former slaves (13). Regardless of whether one trusts their and the narrator's explanations, Edward's silence is highly significant during the course of the story; Nash, first betrayed by his Father(land), now finds himself abandoned by his surrogate father – Edward (the West) – only to be forced to coin a new relationship with Africa and his African history all by himself. It is no surprise therefore that his successive letters recount both his worsening material conditions and the dominating sense of non-belonging: "[a]t times like this, it is strange to think that these people of Africa are called our ancestors" (32).

The more Nash gives up hope of getting back to America, the more his perception of the dark continent changes. On October 2nd 1840 he writes: "my present domestic arrangements have caused some offense to those who would hold on to America as a beacon of civilization […]. Are we not in Africa?" (40) thus turning his back on the conventional rhetoric of moral progress which he himself once had wanted to impose on the Africans. One of the last letters, dated January 3rd 1842, informs Edward about his three wives and African children who, in addition to English, "receive, from their mothers, instruction in African language, as I do" (60). In the same letter, Nash uses for the first time the phrase "we, the coloured man" (60), symbolically including himself in the category previously foreign to him, and he ceases to refer to America as his home. He claims even to appreciate "this Commonwealth of Liberia" which "has provided [him] with the opportunity to open up [his] eyes and cast off the garb of ignorance which has encompassed [him] all too securely the whole course of [his] life" (61). Nonetheless, such comments are juxtaposed with Nash's remarks on the failure of his mission and on the impossibility of salvaging his relationship with Edward. "The school is no more […] [and] [t]his missionary work […] is futile" (62), Nash admits, and concludes that "[p]erhaps in this realm of the hereafter you [Edward] might explain to me why you used me for your purposes and then expelled me to this Liberian paradise" (62). Then Nash urges Edward to stay in America, as if sensing the possibility of his former master following him: "[i]t only remains for me once more to urge you to remain in your country" (63), though this letter does not reach Edward on time.

Nash seems to have resigned himself to the fact that he will never leave Africa and that he needs to build his life there, though now on his own terms. However, despite Nash's bidding his former master farewell, the letter does not mark the end of their story. In fact, Nash's disillusionment coincides with Edward's own alienation from the West and Edward's own voyage, which started as a rescue mission, begins to resemble a pilgrimage, suggesting that for Edward, it is religion that gives meaning to the narrative of his life. When still on the ship, Edward "would rehearse scenes from the life of Christ," seeing that "even in Christ's moments of greatest adversity […] his Lord's face never lost its purity and compassion" (44). From Christ's always forgiving image, Edward draws hope for absolution for himself as well as for other slave owners. Consequently, it is with truly religious fervour that he pursues Nash into the interior, only to learn of Nash's death. The sorrowful message is conveyed by Madison, another of his former slaves, who hands Edward the letter "placed into his hands by Nash" on his deathbed. Nash gave Madison the letter "on the understanding that Madison would personally give it to his former master, and to him alone" (59) and, due to its untimely arrival, the letter grows to signify the insufficiency of the written word as a means of communication between the two; namely, Nash gives the letter to Madison suspecting he will never meet Edward and Edward reads it when there is no hope of his ever meeting Nash. Nonetheless, Edward decides to reach the last reported place of Nash's existence, and once led there by Madison, and watched by the surprised natives living in the area, he joins the choir of the voices which, as one may surmise, the father who opened the novel was hearing across a temporal and spatial distance. Edward decides that he would sing the hymn listened to by the natives with surprising empathy: "Their hearts began to swell with the pity that one feels for a fellow being who has lost both his way and his sense of purpose" (70). Therefore, unlike Conrad's Marlow, and more like the protagonists of Wilson Harris's novels, Edward melts into the seamless body of history, myth and time, where no artificially established binaries hold.[4]

The allegorical aspect of this scene is linked to its visual dimension, but also to its evocation of orality, used here to represent African culture; thus a former slave master reunites with his former slave in a humanly universal song of longing, which is intuitively understood by the natives. The song operates beyond the constraints of race and time, and it alludes to the subversive power of music, which enabled the predominantly illiterate Africans to preserve their distinct cultural identity (Gilroy 35-6). However, at the same time, Edward's revulsion at the sight of "this spectre of peopled desolation" (69) and the natives' puzzlement at Edward's singing reinforce the idea of cross-cultural misunderstanding. The tension between textuality and orality, however, goes far beyond the Black Atlantic context and it remains one of the emblematic features of postcolonial fiction. The forceful introduction of the colonized into the colonial linguistic system took place all over the world and, though described by the colonizers in terms of a gift, it was a rather violent process entailing their historical and cultural dispossession (Gikandi 34). Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (63) claims even that the deeply rooted disregard

4. Wilson Harris (re)tells the complex history of the Caribbean through allegorical journeys into the Guyanese interior (Slemon 157). Harris's excursions are consciousness-changing experiences as his protagonists travel not so much to reach their destinations as to discover a metaphysical connection between themselves, Nature, History and the landscape. Hence, more often than not, Harris's novels have open endings with his protagonists disappearing in the primordial forests of Guyana (Maes-Jelinek 247-59).

for oral tradition continues to place postcolonial cultures in a position of inferiority to the west, while the western belief in the superiority of the written word stems directly from colonial capitalism where material value was rendered in words. Walter Benjamin too considered the novel incompatible with the art of story-telling ("Storyteller" 370), but many postcolonial writers have successfully reconciled the two conventions.[5] Caryl Phillips's own supplementation of textuality with music in a solemn scene shows oral and written traditions as equally valid sources for evoking the past. Thus, Phillips creatively draws from the legacy of all his ancestors, as if taking Derek Walcott's advice from "The Muse of History" (36-7).[6]

Phillips, however, does not forsake his realist imperative and proves that allegorical realism "is not antithetical to techniques of literary experimentation" (Dalley 14). "The Pagan Coast" is deeply invested in a verifiable representation of historical reality, paying attention, at points in painstaking detail, to historical facts and material conditions. At the beginning, the reader is provided with details concerning the establishment and workings of the American Colonization Society, the procedural choice of former slaves for recolonization or verifiable dates, for example that the first voyage took place on January 31st, 1820 when the ship *Elizabeth* left New York harbour with eighty-six people on board (8). Moreover, Nash's letters provide a plethora of historical details about the everyday existence in Liberia, its climate, or natural vegetation, which are additionally mixed with his views on the historical changes and capitalist exploitation of Africa. At one point, for example, Nash writes that "[t]hough cotton is raised in this country, there is at present not so much as to be able to manufacture clothes" (25). Elsewhere he comments on people being sold back into slavery, despite the functioning ban on the slave-trade:

> In our neighbouring settlement, a Mr Charles, an American, his money grown short due to the ruin of his smallholding near Monrovia, borrowed two native boys […] [and] he carried them to a slave factory and sold them for the equivalent of twelve dollars. (31-2)

What is more, the reader gains information about the former slaves' lives, enabling him to understand the social and economic changes taking place in Africa. For example, we learn that the already mentioned Madison "settled in Monrovia and was eking out a living as a small trader selling palm oil, rice, camwood and animal skins to passing European and American ships" (45). Needless to say, such commentaries add to "The Pagan Coast" a significant amount of historical realism, constructing a believable image of a particular historical moment.

The same spirit permeates the second section of Phillips's novel, entitled "West," where, just as in "The Pagan Coast," the author continues to negotiate a historically verifiable, yet universalised, image of the slave trade. "West" is narrated by an old slave, Martha Randolph, who in her dying days tries to rebuild her life as a free individual. Here, as previously, the author resorts to the motif of a journey and we meet Martha in the Colorado Territory, which she has reached after a long and tiring voyage, hoping

5. For more on orality and postcolonial fiction see *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy* (2011) by Neil Kortenaar.

6. The scene may also bring to mind Wilson Harris's games with textuality, music, dance and folklore. Through bringing together the legacy of all the groups that have left their mark on the Caribbean, Harris embraced cultural hybridity as well as reconciling the Amerindian, European and African sources of historical memory, reaching beyond cultural differences. To learn more about Harris's novelistic and philosophical output see *Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination* (1999) edited by Andrew Bundy.

to find her way to California where, as she trusts, "you could be a part of this country, without feeling like you wasn't really a part" (74). However, Martha stands no chance of success, as her health is visibly deteriorating, and thus one accompanies her on an inner voyage through her miscellaneous memories, rather than on a physical journey. Martha's thoughts take the shape of a sequence of images which reflect both her personal experiences and the history of slavery in the United States, conferring an allegorical dimension on her experience. Among other memories, she thinks about her youth in Virginia and the harsh times that followed the death of her first owner and brought about Martha's separation from her beloved daughter. As if confronting the reader with a realist painting, Phillips presents her memory of the moment of the slave auction in striking detail: "I stand with the rest of Virginia property," Martha recalls, "[t]hen the auctioneer slaps his gravel against a block of wood. […] He is calling out the date, the place, the time. […] Slaves. Farm animals. Household furniture. Farm tools. We are to be sold in this order" (76). In these lines, one clearly sees the hierarchy of goods, with slaves being regarded as property, and the pictorial quality of the scene transforms it into an extended metaphor, or even an allegory, of the mercantile economy. Simultaneously, due to its verifiability in poignant descriptions (Bibb 33, Anderson 63), it constitutes an accurate account of the slave trade.

The results of the related events are predictable. Martha and her daughter are both sold, albeit to different destinations which, in turn, links their fate to the whims of colonial economy. This symbolism is yet enriched when Martha's second owner wants to resell her. "She knew this would eventually happen," Martha thinks retrospectively, "for the crops were not selling, and once again the cattle had come back from the market. A merciful market where nothing would sell" (80). Martha calls the market merciful, which brings to mind the slaves being placed at its mercy, but also suggests that for her, all forms of trade are reminders of the slave trade. At one point, Martha finds herself in a store owned by Chester, a black man, who, rebelling against the capitalist economy, refuses to gain profit from selling goods: "I asked him what he sold, and he told me that he didn't sell a 'damn thing'" (83). Even so, Chester is well aware of the importance of money: "[h]e said that if we were going to prospect […] we ought to try and make a little money, too" (83). Moreover, the store secures Chester a social position "amongst merchants, watchmakers, carpenters, […] [though] trading nothing" (84). Martha, in turn, starts selling her services as a cook and they both still depend on the market which, somehow similarly to Eric Williams's claims, has less regard for colour than for social class and money (Williams 44). In such a world, titular freedom does not change one's place on the social ladder. "I was free now, but it was difficult to tell what difference being free was making to my life. I was just doing the same things like before, only I was more contented, not on account of no emancipation proclamation, but on account of my Chester" (84), says Martha, describing experiences that are as faithful to the past as they could be to today's capitalist reality. Indeed, the only true freedom she earns comes in death, although she dies in a foreign place and is buried by strangers, who have not even learned her real name (94).

An even more intricate struggle with the legacy of colonialism may be observed in the following part, "Crossing the River," which is narrated from the viewpoint of an eighteenth-century white man, the captain of a slave trading ship, James Hamilton. Here Phillips admits to having drawn inspiration from *Journal of a Slave Trader* by John

Newton and the section is subtitled "Journal of a voyage intended (by God's permission) in the Duke of York, snow, from Liverpool to the Windward Coast of Africa etc., commenced the 24th August 1752." Its form mirrors the graphic and thematic schemata of the colonial marine logbooks; it is preceded by a list of officers and mariners, with full names and functions, which stands in stark contrast with the numbering system devised for slaves. The journal's narration is fragmented, and it consists of dated entries describing everyday operations of the ship. The tone employed is technical and unemotional; one may read for example that "George Robinson seduced a woman slave big with child […]. Her number was 72…" or that "[o]ne that was fevered jumped overboard (No. 97)" (115). Hamilton notes also that "[t]he price of slaves has run to 125 bars and upwards" (104) or that "goods for 5 slaves […] in earlier times might have purchased 20" (106). However, in the parts where Hamilton writes to his wife, he employs a completely changed voice, which at points may be described as sentimental. On 10th January, for instance, Hamilton notes that, having thought of his wife, he has "written [him]self into tears, yet [he] feel[s] a serenity [he] never imagined" (110). Likewise, in passages addressed to her he avoids any description of physical violence as well as noting with sadness the instance when a certain Mr Ellis suggests that the slave traders, like Hamilton and his father before him, should not call themselves Christians (119).

Though Hamilton is the only narrative voice in "Crossing the River," it is through him that Phillips conveys the duality of the colonial discourse and allegorizes the colonial document; the section is not going to be read solely through the prism of a particular piece named by the author, but through the net of narrative and historical associations it evokes. It is no secret that in his novels Phillips is neither writing fully original journals, nor copying the historical ones, but creating pastiches, or "montages," as Lars Eckstein (73) calls them. Nonetheless, the primary aim of such montages, or rather rewritings, is the recovering of the silent presence of the African others from the documents originally devised to silence them; in other words, by faithfully imitating popular eighteenth-century conventions of private historiography, letters and travelogues, Phillips travesties the power of the first-person narrator and his "anti-conquest" rhetoric (Pratt 7).[7] On the one hand, Hamilton, like "a new king" of eighteenth-century fiction (de Certeau 157), silences other, potentially subversive, voices and presents his version of the truth. On the other hand, the conflict between his occupation, his sensitivity and his faith might remind one of Matthew Lewis or John Stedman, for example, who underplayed their involvement in the colonial project.[8] By inviting us to recognise these conventions, and by exposing inconsistencies in Hamilton's tone, Phillips encourages us to notice the stories of the slaves buried under the layers of discourse. It does not seem fortuitous, then, that the last scene of "Crossing the River" reflects the ending of "The Pagan Coast," showing "the ill-humoured slaves […] [who] sing their melancholy lamentations" as they leave the shores of Africa (Phillips 124). Their song,

7. Pratt defines "anti-conquest" discourse as a narrative strategy of self-representation whereby "European bourgeois subjects […] secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (7).

8. John Stedman (1744-1797), a British-Dutch soldier, was the author of *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Matthew Lewis (1775-1818), the English writer who inherited a Jamaican plantation, was the author of *The Journal of a West India Proprietor*. Both texts are first-person narratives and thus intriguing records of the authors' inner struggle between their privileged position within the slave-owning system and their growing awareness of African slaves' humanity.

which echoes Edward's hymn, is also a promise that, one day, their history will find its way back to the present.

The last section of the novel, "Somewhere in England," portrays the Second World War through the eyes of Joyce, an average Englishwoman, living outside the mainstream of history. As in previous sections, Joyce's story revolves around particular historical events and their universal dimension. Additionally, her narrative resembles an interior monologue and thus shows history from a deeply personal perspective, expanding retrospectively the other forms of destruction and displacement evoked in the novel; as such, it shows that an allegorically-realist vision of history is not only public and universal, but also intimate. More precisely, Joyce associates the war with the death of her mother and her husband, Travis, an Afro-American G.I., whom she married during the war. One of the most touching scenes takes place when Joyce is looking for the body of her mother, who perished in a bombing. As Joyce says:

> Everywhere I looked I could see mountains of rubble, crashed cars, and battered trams. […] And in the streets, men with flatcaps and women with head-scarves scavenged at the ruins of their houses […]. Everybody seemed to be suffering their own private war tragedy. (179-80)

This realistic description of the town's physical destruction is reminiscent of other cities and other wars of past and present, but also a reminder that every war is a personal tragedy; likewise, when Joyce receives a telegram informing her of Travis's death, the moment is juxtaposed with the end of the war. "The telegram didn't say much" (229), she remembers, and while the people outside burn the effigies of Hitler, she feels like "the only one who's lost anything. They'd lost nothing" (229). History, then, truly proves to be a heap of broken images, to use T. S. Eliot's metaphor, none of which is more significant than the other, but all of which are intricately connected.

Despite her trauma, Joyce is a survivor and her story concludes long after the war, in 1963. One day, Joyce sees a black man waiting at her door and she instantly knows that he is the son whom, after Travis's death, she gave up for adoption (231). Her thoughts first wander to the impression she is about to make on her child, only to give way to the need of facing him in all honesty: "Forty-five years old, and I knew I looked awful, but there wasn't any time to fret over appearances. Not now. I took a deep breath and turned to face him" (232). The act of taking a deep breath and turning to look into her son's face undoubtedly takes a lot of strength and, in a sense, it stands for what Phillips himself is doing – taking a deep breath and looking into a history that is both uninviting and complicated. "I almost said make yourself at home, but I didn't. At least I avoided that. Sit down. Please, sit down," (232) she says and thus invites her (un)wanted child to share this moment with her. Their meeting is significant as the man is also the son of Travis, the last child sold by the father into slavery; it is, therefore, not only a reconciliation between a single parent and a child, but also between all the negligent parents and lost children of history, as well as the children of former masters and slaves, to whom history not only matters, but to whom it may offer redemption.

The closing frame of the novel goes back to the figure of the unnamed father, who was listening for the voices of his abandoned children, but it solidifies the reassuring message of Joyce's story. Instead of merely waiting for the sounds, the father is now listening to the tales of all the dispossessed and those entangled in history; as he says: "the many-tongued chorus of the common memory begins again to swell" and it makes

him "acknowledge greetings from those who level pints of ale in the pubs of London […] from those who submit to (what the French call) neurotic inter-racial urges in the boulevards of Paris" (235). What truly matters in these stories, however, is continuous survival against all odds: "and my other children, their voices hurt but determined, they will survive the hardships of the far bank. […] Survivors all" (235). Therefore Edward Williams, James Hamilton or Joyce are as much a part of the tale as Nash, Martha, Travis, or even "[a] barefoot boy in Sao Paulo" (235). Thus, much like Walcott (64), Phillips refrains from judging history and opens the novel to experiences beyond the immediate context of African slavery. In so doing, he draws from the legacy of documented history and colonial literature, as well as from memory and orality, binding together allegorical and realist traditions and teaching us that historical experiences are always universal and singular in their nature. The novel therefore is as much a tale of what happened, as of what may still happen, and in the year 2017 it is every bit as actual as it was on the day of its publication. "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" (235), says the father, as if calling out on behalf of all the slaves and masters of past and present.

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